

Mescalism and Peyotism

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The article by James H. Howard, "The Mescal Bean Cult of the Central and Southern Plains: An Ancestor of the Peyote Cult?" (*American Anthropologist*, 59: 75-87) requires some comment on its method and its conclusions.

In discussing my summary of the "mescal bean" pharmacology, he writes:

"Quoting T. A. Henry (1924: 395) [there is no quoting of this authority, only citation and summarizing] he states [if he is quoting, how can it be La Barre who "states"?] that the mescal bean resembles nicotine in physiological action, and that the contents of one bean are capable of causing nausea, convulsions, and even death by asphyxiation."

The original says "are said to," "Havard, quoting one Bellanger, says," and "according to Dr. Rothroek's informant." It points out that "in any case, a rupture of the hard, leathery coat of the bean would be required for the release of the alkaloid in the bean-flesh" – an important consideration, since any number of whole beans might be swallowed with impunity if the hard covering should remain intact.

In refutation of T. A. Henry, *The Plant Alkaloids*, a recognized authority though now possibly a dated one, Howard adduces the secondhand statement of one Ojibwa about another and concludes that "Clearly, there is need for further pharmacological study of the mescal bean." No doubt there is, but not on these grounds; a more immediate need is discrimination between controlled pharmacological studies and one native secondhand informant. Indeed, Howard later (p. 84) quotes Dorsey on: "a small red bean, which produced a violent spasm, and finally unconsciousness, this condition being indicated by the inability of the novitiate to suffer pain when the jaw of a gar-pike was drawn over his naked body."

Sophorine (= cytisine = ulexine = baptitoxine) has long been synthesized and its pharmacodynamics have been studied sufficiently to indicate that it is a violent and dangerous substance, a conclusion not to be dismissed on the grounds of one Ojibwa's report of another's alleged experience.

Later in his discussion, Howard quotes (p. 77) "A curious and slightly garbled note in La Barre..." Garbled it may be, but in quoting one short paragraph Howard manages to leave out two question marks, change the spelling three times and the punctuation once, give incorrect pagination and, gratuitously I think, correct Voegelin's field notes. Then he remarks mollifyingly (p. 77) that "The collection of tribes listed by Mrs. Voegelin may seem odd but it is actually quite typical of Quapaw gatherings, which are attended by individuals from many Oklahoma tribes." There seems no occasion for remarking on a fact known to

all students of peyotism. Mrs. Voegelin needs no extenuation, if I still do, inasmuch as her data are thoroughly in accord with well known peyote practice. Howard continues (p. 77):

"This paragraph deserves some comment in the present context. For one thing, "mescalism" and "Delaware 'shooting' ceremonies" are parts of the same phenomenon, the mescal bean ceremony."

This may well be the case in the present instance, but it is misleading. Not all "shooting" ceremonies of the Delaware, and certainly not of all Algonkians and others, are necessarily mescal bean shooting; nor are all mescal shooting ceremonies necessarily fully patterned mescal eating rites. What Howard would establish in his categorical statement is precisely what he is under the necessity of demonstrating.

Howard writes (p. 75) that "In his study of peyotism, La Barre (1938:105-109; 126-127) notes the presence of this [mescal bean] cult and cites many of the principal sources but, perhaps because his primary interest was in peyotism, he has overlooked many of the readily available sources."

In the 22 appendices to the original dissertation (now on file at Yale University), of which nine were published in condensed form and edited by other hands, these and other matters are voluminously discussed; Howard's attention is directed to this source.

Howard's basic thesis that the ritual form of peyotism is derived from an earlier mescal bean ceremony is a good one. We do not know the origins of the ritual form of peyotism, except that it was first well established and codified in the southern Plains. However, it is to be hoped that the mescalism-peyotism thesis may be better established in the forthcoming Howard-Jones monograph on the red bean cult than by basing it on the frankly hearsay evidence of one Ponca informant, Louis McDonald, since this is a critical issue and deserves better documentation.

The Plains Siouans are recipient tribes in peyotism, so the hypothesis that the Siouan red bean cult seriously affected the original form of the rite is a weak one, especially since the peyote rite was formulated in the southern Plains (Kiowa-Comanche) before the Siouans borrowed it. It is even less probable that the Central Algonkin "shooting ceremonies" of the Midewewin type shaped the form of peyotism, since on the whole the Algonkians received peyotism still later than did the Siouans. Furthermore, the natural range of *Sophora secundiflora* (the "mescal bean") and *Lophophora williamsii* (the "peyote button," the name peyote coming from Aztekan) lies in Texas, the Southwest, and northern Mexico. It would therefore seem more reasonable at the moment to look southward for origins, rather than to the Siouans or the central Algonkians. However, it is probable that the thesis is still essentially right: a prior red bean cult (from Texas? southwestern Athapaskans? Mexico?) paved the way and even shaped the form of the peyote ritual. That is, the use of the red bean spread from south to north (whence, unfortunately, the bulk of present ethnographic knowledge comes), in much the same way as the Peyote Cult seems later to have spread. The theory is an excellent one.

But again we find ourselves critical of Howard's method. First of all, on his comparative trait list (p. 86) the "Use of narcotic" is not a critical resemblance in the New World, inasmuch as many narcotics are used ritually in America, especially from the southern United States south into Amazonia. Moreover, the use of narcotic drugs may in fact have

an inner consistency with basic New World religion at large (and even paleoasiatic shamanism?). Again, how can the traits of "Only shamans admitted," "First fruits ceremony," "Shooting of mescal bean," "Deer symbolism," "Use of fox skins," and "Use of white paint" establish any common origins when Howard lists them as absent in peyotism and largely present in the red bean cult? Furthermore, what weight of critical specificity for this general area can be laid on such traits as "Use of drum," "Movement of musicians," "Meeting held in tipi," "Central fire," "Dancing" and "Magical performances"? And to adduce the use of feathers, of whatever species of bird, in any American Indian context is feeble evidence for specific historical connections of mescalism and peyotism.

There are still other methodological flaws in Howard's table of traits. He lists "First fruits ceremony" as being absent from the Plains peyote rite though present in three red bean cults, so this trait also proves nothing. What he means by this ceremony is unclear, but historically the ritual peyote meal was explicitly involved with first fruits ceremonies in Mexico. The meal consisted of boneless meat, parched or popped corn in sugar water, and fruit – traits which are retained everywhere in classical Plains peyotism. He correctly lists "Deer symbolism" as being absent from the Plains peyote rite – but at his methodological peril, since in Mexican peyotism deer meat, deer hoof-prints, and the peyote plant itself are all specifically equated.

In brief, it would seem that Howard has advanced the interesting possibility of the connection between mescalism and peyotism but little beyond the point where I left it nearly two decades ago as an auxiliary hypothesis; worse, his ethnological direction is wrong.

The southern Athapaskans may eventually prove to be less of a primary influence on Plains peyotism than was formerly supposed, though well documented evidence (ground altar, water drum, and other peyotist traits) still supports their claim. But for other compelling reasons, such as the botanical provenience of the red bean and peyote, we should still look southward – probably to Texas, the eastern Southwest, or northeastern Mexico – for the shaping of the well-defined southern Plains peyote ritual, rather than to Algonkin Midewewin or the as yet largely Siouan Red Bean Cult. This seems all the more probable since the red bean has been found archeologically in Cave No. 1 at Site 2 in San Saba County, Texas, and on a Basketmaker horizon at Rio Fuente in Chihuahua.¹

Notes

1) Wendell C. Bennett and Robert M. Zingg, *The Tarahumara*. Chicago, 1935, p. 358; see also A. T. Jackson, in *University of Texas Publications, Anthropological Papers*, vol. III, no. 1, 1938, p. 69.